

# A Strategic Evaluation of the Influence of Research on Public Policy

Understanding how research results can influence policy decisions and technology adoption in developing countries is critical to achieving the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) mandate. To better understand how research can affect policy decisions, the Centre's Evaluation Unit launched a study in 2001. This two-year evaluation, one of the largest undertaken to date by IDRC, sought answers to three fundamental questions: What does policy influence mean? In which cases has research supported by IDRC influenced policy? What factors contribute to, or inhibit, policy influence?

In designing the study, IDRC hoped to be able to apply the results at three levels. At the program level, impact was expected on the design of future IDRC-supported projects and programs that seek to influence policymaking. At the corporate level, an assessment of past programming initiatives would provide valuable input into the design of the Centre's corporate program framework. From a methodological point of view, the study also wished to reflect on how to design a strategic evaluation of the influence of research on the process of public policymaking.

## Challenges

Several challenges were faced during the design phase of the evaluation. Perhaps the most critical was to determine what exactly policy influence is and how it occurs.

The natural tendency when looking to assess a project's influence is to try to identify direct effects, that is, to establish cause and effect links between a project and its final impact. This tendency is fuelled by the pressure projects and agencies feel to demonstrate that development has occurred. However, attribution of cause and effect is difficult to prove. How can one be certain that a specific project caused this or that change to occur? Nonetheless, such are the conclusions often looked for from evaluations.

As the complexity of the policy or research process increases and the number of actors involved escalates, the discovery of verifiable links between cause and effect becomes all the more unlikely. As a result, evaluations often focus on whether a project has succeeded or not rather than on *how* the project succeeded. A preoccupation with final results often leads to missed opportunities to understand *how* what did happen actually happened. Without understanding how, it is difficult to learn from the past to improve the future.

No matter the type of evaluation, it can be hard to determine when, and for how long, to evaluate a project's impact. One often-used indicator of success is that local partners have assumed *ownership* of the project outputs and used them for development purposes. This is a reasonable measuring stick, but given the time lag between generation of results and their ownership and use, projects are most likely to play the least significant role precisely when impact finally occurs. Donors often try to assess their contributions when they are, in fact, least involved.

## Preparation

To encourage user input, IDRC evaluations' design and implementation are preceded by a review that seeks user input on two questions: Who will use the findings? How will they be used? Answers to these questions guide both the design of the evaluation and the process of analysis. This user-focused reflection greatly enhances the potential application of the findings because the users must articulate their needs, express a desire to use the outputs expected from the evaluation, and be interested in using the results of the study.

Because this study's primary objective was to inform IDRC program support, its primary users were management and program staff at IDRC. Both were involved in identifying issues and projects they felt had influenced policy. Recognition of the long-term nature of policy influence led to the inclusion of projects IDRC had supported for a relatively long time.



## Methodology

Development of a workable methodology for the study was aided by a series of reviews, by consultations with others with similar interests and broad evaluation experience, and by direct involvement of IDRC program staff in the implementation team. Background documents for the study included a literature review; a paper proposing a framework for the study; reviews of IDRC's project completion reports, programs, and past evaluations; and a documented "history of intent," which reflects on the Centre's interest in policy influence and research utilization throughout its 30-year history.

Because research for development is located upstream from any development impact, a framework for the study was sought that would capture the various types of policy influence existing within the extended policymaking process. The original framework identified three forms of influence: expanding policy capacities; broadening policy horizons; and affecting policy regimes. However, after review of the case studies in the field of information and communication technologies (ICTs), a fourth dimension was added: developing new policy regimes. This new element captured research designed to provide input into emerging areas, such as ICTs, where the current deficit of relevant information opens opportunities for research to shape policy.

Following this process of consultation, framework development, and review, the decision was made to base the evaluation on a series of 22 case studies, covering 20 countries, each of which would employ a common method of investigation. Ideally suited to capturing both the opportunities and challenges in the policymaking process, the case-study approach provided useful stories and narratives that were attentive to local conditions and historical circumstances.

The projects investigated were selected on the basis of IDRC program area, uniqueness, comparability, type of influence, type of organization doing the research and being influenced, duration of IDRC involvement, and intentional versus unintentional influence. Since the objective was to understand the process of policy influence, the projects selected were those where a claim of influence could be clearly identified and articulated by the IDRC staff member proposing the case.

By and large, the studies were carried out by researchers from the country or region where the original project had been situated. An important aspect of the methodology was the completion of two studies before fully undertaking the remaining studies. Based on these two pilot cases, the consultants hired to conduct the remaining case studies were convened for a planning session. All met as a group with the evaluation team to ensure that everyone shared a common understanding of the terms of reference. This proved to be invaluable: the common frame of reference and shared language that developed among the evaluators encouraged both depth and richness within the individual cases, and allowed for analysis across case studies.

The case studies were designed to present detailed stories about the policy influence process, providing not only in-depth accounts of the work that IDRC had supported, but the changing context in which the work was carried out and the processes that were involved. It was the interplay between the project itself and the surrounding environment that was targeted. These experiences could be used by program officers to plan future projects and by program managers to shape their strategic thinking about the relationships, strategies, and types of research support required to influence public policy.

Collective analysis of the results was integral to the study's methodology. The researchers who conducted the case studies, the users of the research, external experts, and the IDRC implementation team all participated. To accomplish this level of interaction, a series of four workshops was convened in Johannesburg, Montevideo, Bangkok, and Ottawa. Together, participants verified that the data that had been collected was accurate and developed their preliminary insights into why and how research had influenced policy in these cases. This consultative approach placed considerable responsibility on the user of the findings both to delve into the outputs of the study and to undertake in-depth analysis.

Collaborative analysis does complicate the life of the evaluation team, not only in terms of the time involved, but also in terms of ensuring methodological integrity. However, user involvement dramatically increases the potential for influence and relevance of the evaluation findings, and makes any extra effort worthwhile.



## Analysis and Outputs

The collaborative analysis undertaken during the regional workshops was combined with an across-case analysis and an in-house review of the evaluation methodology. The objectives were to assess IDRC's role and position in the research and policy influence process, review the policy influence typology developed for the study, and discuss the factors, such as context, motivation, and capacities, that contribute to or inhibit policy influence.

The results of the literature review suggested the importance of cultural differences that exist between researchers and policymakers and the enlightenment function research plays in policymaking. The research to policy link is not direct, but rather depends on a gradual shift in thinking over time.

Many different frameworks can be advanced to explain the factors that constrain or facilitate the use of research in policymaking. Consultations during the study suggested that the most important way to strengthen this link is to encourage close interaction between researchers and policymakers during the design and conduct of the research as well as during dissemination of the results. Other important supporting conditions include: formats in which results are disseminated; relationships between researchers and decision-makers that last beyond the research project; public dissemination and debate of the research results, followed by use of the results by groups in society who wish to encourage or advocate change; and strengthening capacity to carry out policy inquiry, as those trained often rise to positions in which they can implement or encourage policy change.

The four workshop reports provided valuable insight into a series of issues that seem to affect the outcomes of projects seeking to achieve policy influence. To validate these factors, they are being used as a template to analyze the 22 cases. The factors are: project intent; IDRC's role; duration; dissemination and communication; gender considerations; IDRC inputs; and personal qualities and interpersonal relationships. We expect our analysis to shed light on the importance of each of these factors in helping projects influence policy.

The original *intent* of the project is a primary consideration. We would like to determine if projects tend to have greater policy influence when this is an explicit goal from the outset. Does the

project's primary objective have to be policy influence for it to be effective?

How does the way IDRC perceives its role affect project performance? Does the influence exerted by a project vary when IDRC sees its role in different ways? IDRC supports projects designed to build research capacity, support specific policy positions (e.g., tobacco control or equity for the poor), bring under-represented groups into the policy arena, create coalitions to take action on a particular policy, and make information available on specific issues. Although IDRC may take several of these stances at the same time, and move from one to another over time, do some of these roles enhance the policy influence of the projects?

Does duration influence project success? Do projects tend to have more policy influence if funding continues for longer periods of time? What kinds of influences show up early and late in the life of a project? When timing makes a difference, what are the surrounding conditions?

How do dissemination and communication affect policy influence? Does the extent and kind of policy influence depend on the form of communication with decision-makers? Which communication methods or combination of methods are most effective? What differences exist between personal contacts, written materials, workshops, training courses, and data systems in different scenarios? What are the effects of the movement of project personnel into positions of authority?

How do the projects selected for the study understand gender considerations within the policy process? Were gender equity and equality integrated into the project design and implementation from the very beginning? If so, do these projects better incorporate gender analysis within the research? Does the gender of the project leader matter? Does the gender of the target group or the decision-maker make a difference?

Does the extent of IDRC inputs matter? Does policy influence tend to be higher when IDRC inputs are greater in terms of money, continuity of IDRC staff, IDRC's knowledge of local context (e.g., understanding of the issue, structures, politics, and culture)? Is more better, or is it better to focus resources on specific inputs?





How important are personal qualities and interpersonal relationships. Are there correlations between individual characteristics and the nature and strength of policy influence (e.g., charisma and leadership)? What effects can be attributed to project strategies, such as networking, partnerships, and local and international intermediaries? Do different sorts of relationships tend to be associated with increased or decreased policy influence?

Underpinning all these factors is context. Context is critical and can determine how, when, and to what extent each of these factors can, or has the potential to, influence policy. Because so many contextual factors are outside a project's control, the study tried to characterize the relationship between governments and researchers by seeking answers to several questions. Is the relationship

focused on generating knowledge to feed into a decision-making process? To what extent does a project have to institutionalize ideas and knowledge into a decision-making system to attain influence? What type of leadership does a project require to be influential? What is the nature of the advocacy that surrounds the research and how does advocacy influence policy?

The results of this study of policy influence will benefit IDRC in two broad ways. Future IDRC programing will be guided by the insights gained into how research can be better integrated into local policymaking processes. And, the methodological framework developed for this study will advance our understanding of how best to evaluate the way in which development projects achieve impact within their complex social and cultural environments.

**The International Development Research Centre (IDRC)** is a Canadian public corporation, created to help developing countries find solutions to the social, economic, and natural resource problems they face. Support is directed to building an indigenous research capacity. Because influencing the policy process is an important aspect of IDRC's work, in 2001 the Evaluation Unit launched a strategic evaluation of more than 60 projects in some 20 countries to examine whether and how the research it supports influences public policy and decision-making. The evaluation design and studies can be found at: [www.idrc.ca/evaluation/policy](http://www.idrc.ca/evaluation/policy)